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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/7/2014, Advent 2B
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Our Lord's Forbearance

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My main text for this sermon is our Epistle Lesson, 2 Peter 3. Let me begin by lifting up the last verse of our reading. In this verse, the apostle teaches us how we should conceive the delay of Christ's return. He wants us to view this time prior to Christ's return as a time for salvation:

¹⁵And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. (2 Peter 3:15, RSV)

It is with us, then, as it was in the days of Noah. We eat and drink, marry and give in marriage (Matthew 24:38). We earn our bread "in the sweat of our faces" (Genesis 3:19), wrangling it from ground that is often contrary and makes life hard for us. We love our families and our friends. We rest and have fun when we can. But the apostle would have us add this concern to our list too: that we should count these days as a time of our Lord's forbearance for the sake of salvation — both the salvation of a world in need of Christ and for our salvation too.

In this Second Letter of St. Peter, the apostle is mindful that he is running out of time. Jesus has told him so. The end draws near for Peter:

¹³I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to arouse you by way of reminder, ¹⁴since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. (2 Peter 1:13-14, RSV)

This letter permits him to say some final things to people who are dear to him.

You might want to do the same thing. You might want to write down some final thoughts for your loved ones. Certainly you should have a will. Do not neglect that because sometimes death comes along unexpectedly. It is better to have a will in place even if you are not expecting to die any time soon. But besides a will, you might want to do as St. Peter did. He wrote some final thoughts to people dear to him. It might not have been easy for a born-and-bred fisherman to turn to writing. His short letters might have taken him a long time to write, and he might have scratched out and rewritten many things to try to get them right. And the Holy Spirit was with him and he did get them right, to the benefit of the church all these centuries later. Still, it might not have been easy for him to write his Epistles, and it might not be easy for you to put down on paper something of what life has taught you and something of what you would like to say to others. In fact,

when you are done, it might not seem all that impressive to you, and you might be disappointed in yourself that you have lived all these years, and don't really have too much to say about it. Still, give it a try. Take your turn at being a journal writer or a letter writer to people who are dear to you. Your loved ones might be very grateful to you for that someday. Perhaps your final thoughts will even spare them from some wrong turns in life.

That's what St. Peter wanted. He is writing to churches in Asia Minor — modern-day Turkey — and he is trying to save them from some missteps. In particular, he wants them to cherish each day as a day meant for salvation.

THE DELAY

In this morning's passage, St. Peter seems especially concerned about the delay of our Lord's return. I bet Peter wanted Jesus to return quickly! When Peter stood with the other disciples and watched as Jesus blessed them and ascended into heaven (Luke 24:50-51), it is easy to imagine Peter calling after him, "Hurry back, Lord!" And if he did not yell it out loud, he could well have whispered it to himself. "Come back quickly, Lord, for things are much better when you are here."

But now Peter is getting older. He has had to live many a year without the return of Jesus in power and glory. Indeed, he has come to believe that he is soon to die, and that Jesus might not return before that happens. So he writes to the churches to help them understand this matter of the delay of the Lord. He and his whole apostolic generation are soon to die. How shall the churches think of the time granted to them before Christ comes again?

I think we can see four themes in our text. First, Peter reminds his readers that God measures time differently from us, and so we should trust that Christ will come again at the right time — at the exactly right time God's wisdom specifies. Second, Peter affirms that Christ will indeed come again. Third, the apostle explains the reason for the delay: God is merciful and grants time for repentance, in hope that no one will perish. And fourth, as a kind of culmination, the apostle urges us to use the time granted to us in accordance with the reason time is granted to us at all: that we and others might be saved before it is too late. Let's take these four themes in order.

IT WILL BE THE RIGHT TIME

First, when Christ comes again, it will be at the perfect time. If it seem long in coming to us, that is because God measures time differently from us:

⁸But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. (2 Peter 3:8, RSV)

Well, I guess we can say that *two* days have passed since the Ascension, for two thousand years have come and will soon be gone. How many more days and years and centuries will it be? I do not know. Perhaps Christ will come again later today, even before this evening's Sunday night football. Perhaps he will not come for another ten thousand years. Jesus said that even he does not know the hour of his return. Only his heavenly Father knows that timeline:

But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.
(Mark 13:32, KJV)

Each generation of Christian has the right to feel that Jesus must be near at hand. Especially if the times are starting to feel old and worn-out, so that it is hard to imagine this world going on much longer, it is natural to expect Jesus to come again soon. And maybe you feel that the world has grown old in that sense. But then I recall that seven-year stretch in medieval Europe when the Black Death was stalking the land (1346–53). That plague killed an estimated 30-60% of the population of Europe.¹ Medicine was helpless against it. Death was prowling around and no one really knew how to prevent it. Rich, poor, saint, sinner... they were all vulnerable. Friends were dying, enemies were dying. Everybody seemed to be dying. I bet lots of Christians expected and cried out for Christ to come again. But he did not. And I am glad that he did not, for if he had, then Luther would not have been born, Michelangelo would not have been born. Bach would not have been born. Dostoyevsky would not have been born. Immanuel Lutheran Church would not have been born, and you would not have been born. Then, where would I be?

No, with the Lord a thousand years is as one day. We should not try to dictate the day and hour of Christ's return, because we would only ruin things. When Christ comes again, it will be in accordance with the wisdom of God, and we can leave that to him. He will come again at the perfect time.

YET CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN

Second, though it seems a long time in coming, Christ will indeed come again. It is something for which Christians long. It will be so very good to see our Lord Jesus and to be part of his everlasting kingdom.

Yesterday, Carol and I attended the culminating liturgy for St. Matthew Lutheran Church in upper Manhattan on the West Side. St. Matthew's is celebrating its 350th anniversary, which makes it the oldest, continuous Lutheran congregation in America.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Death

Part of the liturgy included hymns by a visiting Gospel Choir. They sang one hymn that I had not heard since I was a boy — “We’ll Understand It Better By and By.” Of course, the Gospel Choir sang it better and with lots more energy than we shy, constrained farmers sang it back in my day. Still, we sang it with feeling in our own quiet way, and it meant something to us. In fact, the old words of the chorus easily came back to me yesterday and I rather hummed along with the Gospel Choir:

By and by, when the morning comes,
when the saints of God are gathered home,
we’ll tell the story how we’ve overcome,
for we’ll understand it better by and by.²

There will be many blessings in store for our world when Christ comes again. There will be peace on earth, and health in our bodies, and no more tears, no more dying. But among the blessings, there will also be this one: that we’ll understand it better by and by.

In today’s First Lesson, from Isaiah 40, we have some comforting words about the day of the Lord:

¹⁰Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young. (Isaiah 40:10-11, RSV)

In today’s Epistle text, from 2 Peter 3, the images for the return of Christ are frightening at first. The apostle speaks of a loud noise – a roar – and of fire and things “dissolving.” But the outcome of it all is something that sounds really good:

Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. (2 Peter 3:13, KJV)

I sure hope to be part of this, through the grace of Christ. So, let us not lose sight of the main thing: we are speaking of the return of Jesus Christ, and that has got to be a good thing for our world. Scary, yes, but good.

² <http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh525.sht>

THE REASON FOR THE DELAY

Third, St. Peter explains the reason for the delay of Christ. The reason is the mighty heart of God, which does not want anyone to perish, and so gives time for repentance and amendment of life. What a sobering perspective that is on life! For all we know, our Lord Jesus might be desiring right now, this very moment, to come again. He might be almost aching to come and set up a new earth “wherein dwelleth righteousness.” Yet, he agrees with his Father and the Holy Spirit in delaying because he spies, what? you and me? Or yon young person whose life has gotten off to a bad start and who has made some terrible mistakes, but could get back on the right path if only he had some more time. So God grants time. He looks at each of us and grants us some more time. His pity and his hope lead him to that. He grants us more time.

USE THIS TIME FOR SALVATION

And now we come to the fourth theme in this morning’s text — the theme that has implications for you and me and for our church. This time granted to us is not to be wasted or treated frivolously, but rather cherished as a time for “salvation”:

¹⁵And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. (2 Peter 3:15, RSV)

We are Lutherans, and so I doubt that many of us have experienced an “altar call.” Maybe you have seen them on television or in a movie. The real thing can be a powerful moment in life. The heart of it is the question of salvation. Preaching and hymns have worked together to lead the sinner to face a question: “Have you turned to Christ? Have you given your life and your heart to him? Who knows what tomorrow brings? But now is a good time to come to the Lord?”

For Lutherans, we rightfully answer these questions this way: “Yes, I have indeed turned to Christ. I have given my life and my heart to him. This happened when I was baptized. Either I did it myself or my parents did it on my behalf.”

And that is a correct answer. Still, the question urged at the altar call is a good one even for baptized Christians. It amounts to the question, “Have you been true to your baptism? Have you been true to your Savior? Have you been true to Jesus?” If not, now is the time for salvation. Indeed, this is why we are being granted time at all: that we might turn toward Christ this day and each day.

Finally, there are duties laid upon the church, including our church, Immanuel Lutheran Church, by St. Peter’s theme:

¹⁵And count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. (2 Peter 3:15, RSV)

There are men and women, boys and girls in our neighborhood who do not yet know Jesus. If we are neglecting them, then we are misusing the years granted to

our church, for those years are meant for salvation. Why? Because our Maker does not desire that anyone should perish, including our neighbors in this town.

So, let us renew our efforts at evangelism. We have a good Sunday School and Children's Choir. Let's do all we can to build them up. We have a beautiful church. Especially we have a beautiful church these days thanks to all the work going on both outside and inside our church. Let's be eager to make our church even more beautiful by inviting people into it. Let us organize ourselves more and more. Let us bend our resources to the task of salvation. Let us not rest content with the status quo but permits ourselves to burn with mission. Let us permit ourselves to burn with some holy passion to win souls to Christ. In these ways, we will be using well the time granted to us, for we will be using it for salvation, to draw both ourselves and our neighbors to our Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.